CCRI Energy Utility Technology Certificate student Josh Pomplun of Providence climbs a pole at the National Grid training facility in Millbury, Mass. Students spend 64 hours learning to service utility wires at the facility during their second semester.

Energy certificate students get hands-on experience at National Grid training facility

Students in the CCRI Energy Utility Technology Certificate Program use an unusual classroom.

While there is plenty of studying and classroom lecture time, the students also spend time outdoors at the National Grid training facility in Millbury, Mass., climbing mock electrical poles three stories tall and learning to service utility wires.

"I'm definitely here for the math challenge of it and the physical challenge as well," said student Josh Pomplun of Providence. "When you're at the training grounds it's all hands-on."

The Energy Utility Technology Certificate Program, known as ETUT, is a public/private partnership between the Community College of Rhode Island and the U.S. Department of Energy with industry partner National Grid. Students spend two semesters learning to work in the energy industry, studying industry technology and operations, technical math, AC and DC circuits and controls, and computer applications. Safety issues, critical thinking and problem-solving skills are emphasized throughout the program, as are teamwork, time management, workplace behavior and business ethics.

> '... this is a program that's coming alive.'
>
> Timothy Horan, president of National Grid in Rhode Island and New Hampshire

Eight students will complete the program this spring – CCRI's first complement of graduates – and a new session will begin in the fall. In addition to receiving hands-on training with a leading energy utility, students can use the credits they earn in the ETUT program toward an associate degree in Engineering Systems Technology.

Pomplun said he wants to do just that, and then eventually earn a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and design power grids, substations and, perhaps, wind farms.

"You can never start at the top, so it's humbling to see what everyone's doing at all levels," he said about starting in the ETUT program. "It will help me with design to see firsthand what people are building."

Other students may choose to get into the work force right away, and they will leave the program qualified to perform a valuable job with a high hourly wage. Employment with National Grid upon completion of the program is possible, but not guaranteed.

"I've always been interested in electricity, how it works and the science behind it," said ETUT student Brian Hazard of North Kingstown. "This seemed like a good employment opportunity. It's tough to find jobs in this economy and working for National Grid seems like a very reliable job."

Hazard said he plans to seek employment when he completes the program but also would like to pursue an engineering degree.

Students in the ETUT program have a full-time course schedule at the CCRI Knight Campus in Warwick and visit the Massachusetts training ground every Friday during their second semester. Prospective students must complete a math skills placement test and an interview with program staff.

In a ceremony held at the college on March 9 where National Grid awarded a total of $10,000 in scholarships to the program's first class, CCRI President Ray Di Pasquale said, "These are the kinds of opportunities that are really exciting … this is a true partnership that will help get the state back on its feet. It's a true college-to-career program and it's the way it should be done."

The state's entire congressional delegation also attended the scholarship ceremony and praised the public-private partnership that made this program possible.

"We are at the intersection point of two really interesting trends in the United States: One is the smart grid and the other is connections between community colleges and private industry," said U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse.

Congressman James Langevin agreed: "We obviously know it's not just one thing that's going to turn this economy around; it's many things, and one of them is public-private partnerships … we need to make sure that we're creating these partnerships whenever we can."

Timothy Horan, president of National Grid in Rhode Island and New Hampshire, said that his company employs 900 people in Rhode Island who need to know specific technical skills such as those that can be learned in the ETUT program.

"We at National Grid are very proud to work with [President Di Pasquale] and the college," he said. "When you look at the photos of the students at the substations with their vests and hard hats, you know this is a program that's coming alive."

To learn more about the ETUT program and its requirements, including a math placement test review, visit www.ccri.edu/engt.

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